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Saw Phar Dae (born 1945) – Portrait of a KNU Fighter

Georg Winterberger



Introduction

Saw Phar Dae is the focus of this contribution not because he is a famous or especially important figure. He was a KNU fighter in the 1970s to 1990s. The KNU (Karen National Union) is one of the – if not „the“ – political

organization(s) of the Karen,¹ the second largest ethnic group in Myanmar. Demographic figures range widely (from 2.5 to 7 million). They live in different regions of Lower Myanmar and consist of more than twenty subgroups. Native speakers can be divided into Sa'gaw and Pwo speakers, the former living in the Ayeyarwady delta, the latter in the eastern parts of Myanmar close to the Thai border. The majority are Buddhists.² However, the Karen are often seen as mainly Christian since their political orientation was (and still is, to a certain extent) strongly influenced by the KNU, which is led by a Christian elite (Gravers 2014: 175).

Saw Phar Dae is not famous or important as a political leader; neither was he an outstanding fighter, but one of a group around one of the sub-leaders of the Karen. But my interest was awakened by this ordinariness of his career. I wanted to offer a portrait that may shed some light on not well-known persons — on the majority.* I hope it might provide insight and an understanding of everyday people in portraying an unexceptional career, like the one of Saw Phar Dae. Without people like him, nobody would be interested in writing a biography about so-called „important“ people.

I heard of him the first time from one of my key informants in my long time of field research in Mawlamyine, the capital of Mon State, Myanmar (Winterberger 2017: 10–12). Saw Phar Dae is this person's uncle. Initially he was not relevant for me, because my research focus lay neither in the Karen region nor in biographies of KNU fighters. But I reactivated my connections when it came to this biography project. My contact was supportive and he was interested himself in the stories of his uncle. To determine if his uncle was willing to share his story, he brought him to Mawlamyine. This was not that easy, because Saw Phar Dae had not visited the town for 43 years. He was told by his nephew that there was a commemorative ceremony for his late mother – as a pretext. When Saw Phar Dae arrived in Mawlamyine without any ceremony taking place, he wanted to leave the city right away. He returned to his beloved village two days later. This invitation had been a test for my key informant: Would his uncle come to Mawlamyine for the interview with me? Now it was clear that he would not.

Even though I didn't meet Saw Phar Dae at that time, this was actually good for me and my project. I got the chance to interview him in his everyday life and daily routine in his village. However, the journey to Htee Phar Htaw village was strenuous and difficult. My contact led me by motorbike to the area which is still controlled by the KNU. We had to bypass Anankwin village with its (inofficial) border between the area controlled by the Tatmadaw (the Burmese Army) and the KNU area, in order to avoid any checkpoint. The route was still muddy from the rainy season, yet in good condition compared to the "road" we had to take to reach Htee Phar Htaw village after entering the KNU-controlled area. Nevertheless, I was thankful to my guide and informant for leading me to all the villages which were important places in Saw Phar Dae's life – like Win Kha Na and Thanbaya. In addition to that, I had the opportunity to get to know the family of Dawle, the former KNU sub-leader and friend of Saw Phar Dae.

I decided to use the method of the oral history interview, because it allowed me to give Saw Phar Dae the role of the subject of his own history. Oral history can tell us more about the past and democratises the study of history (Perks and Thomson 1998: 360), since the persons in focus are able themselves to articulate and to contribute to their history, too. On the other hand, we have to be aware of the fact that memory is not a static resource. The oral historian has to deal with a subjective version of history, which in addition is embedded in the present notions, feelings, and situation of the interviewee (Perks and Thomson 1998: 270).

When I met Saw Phar Dae, I already knew some of his background from his nephew. I started with everyday conversation and let some time pass to let him become comfortable with the situation of being asked many questions about his life. This is seldom done in the society Saw Phar Dae is living in, as my guide told me. He himself did not know much of his uncle's life history up to the time of my interview. He was helping me as a translator. The interview was carried out in Karen language with immediate translation into English. I tried to give Saw Phar Dae a lot of space in the interview – as suggested by oral historians (Morrissey 1998; Slim and Thompson 1998). I wanted him to follow his own train of thought in order to find out more

about his view of the history of the Karen. Subsequently I put it in a more or less chronological order. Before I present Saw Phar Dae's personal history, an overview of the Karen in Myanmar and their history is given as background to Saw Phar Dae's life.

The Karen

The civil war between the Karen and the military of Myanmar is often titled as *The longest struggle* or as *The world's longest civil war* (Gravers 2014: 173). The roots of this conflict can be traced back to colonial times. The civil war between the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and the Burmese army broke out in January 1949, just one year after Burma attained its independence from Britain. There was never a kind of Karen State in the modern sense of the word, but in the course of the colonial period a strong sense of Karen identity emerged. For that, two overlapping antagonistic factors can be identified that strongly shaped the personal life of Saw Phae Dae as well: the political tensions between the Burmese and the Karen, and the religious divide between the Buddhist and Christian Karen. American Baptist missionaries started their successful missionary work some years after the end of the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824–1826), after the first and still very famous missionary Adoniram Judson had come to Burma in 1813. His attempts to convert Burmese Buddhists were not effective in terms of the number of converts. Missionary work among the animist Karen was providing them with a written language through translation of the Bible. The missionaries introduced the sense of being an ethnic group. In 1881, the Karen National Association (KNA) was formed by Christian Karen with the help of missionaries. In the Burmese rebellions following the Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885, which resulted in the end of the Burmese monarchy and the integration of the whole of Burma into the British empire, Christian Karen were reported to be vigorously helping to support the British troops in their fight against the Burmese Buddhist rebels. In 1929, a Karen leader wrote a book in which he stated that the Burmese and the Karen could not be governed together because of the cultural differences (San C. Po 2001). The ideas developed in the book can be seen as the beginning of the Karen

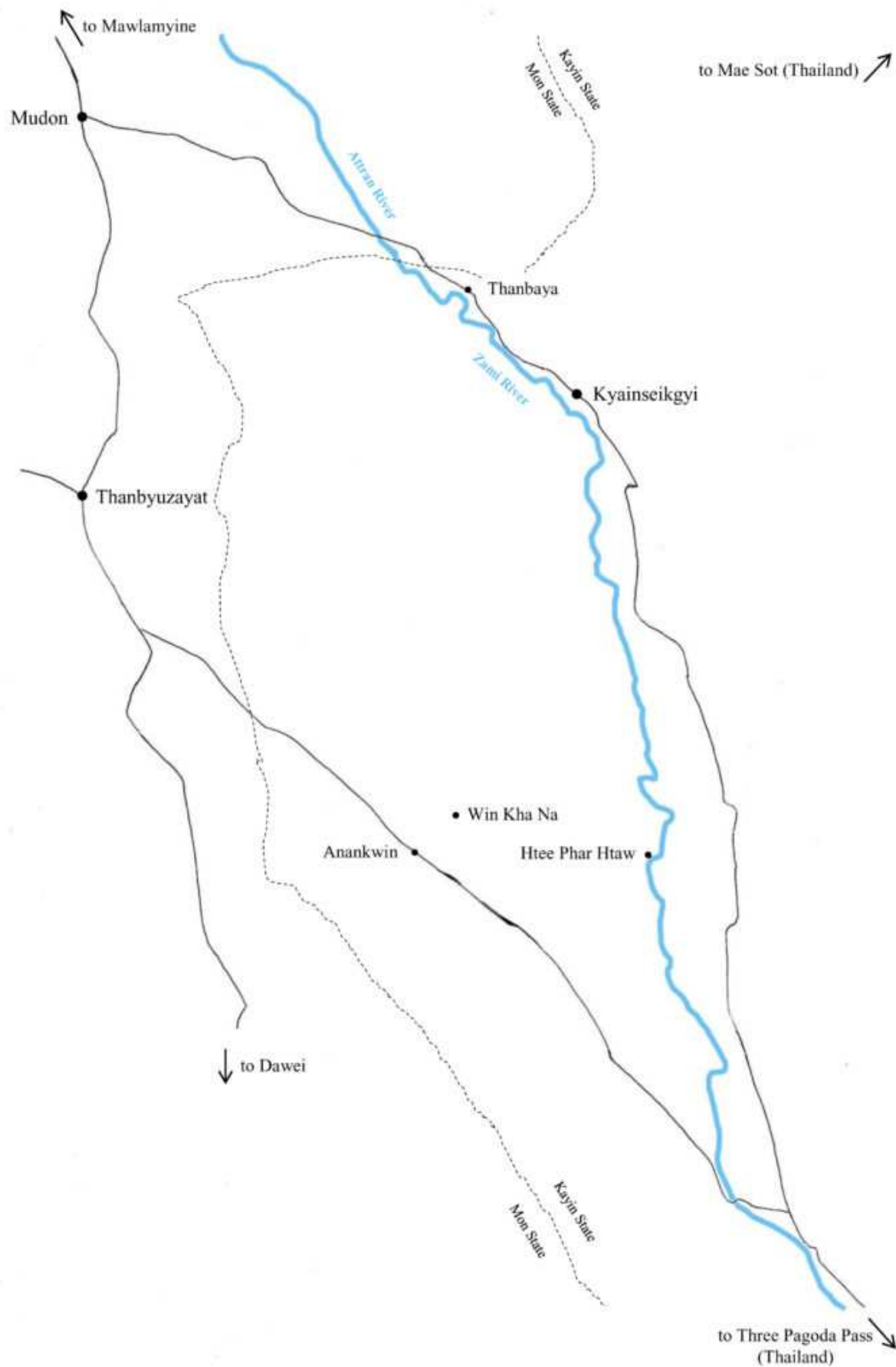
demand for a separate state as a reward for their loyalty to the British. During World War II Karen soldiers served in the British army, fighting the Japanese and their allies, the Burma Independent Army (BIA) under the leadership of Aung San. In 1942 violent clashes took place between the BIA and the Karen in the delta region. This shared experience is a crucial part of the social memory of the Karen – both Christian and Buddhist (Gravers 2007; 2014: 180–182).

In 1947, the Karen National Union (KNU) was formed from the KNA. The leadership consisted – and still consists – of wealthy Christian elite of Karen. The KNU demanded a state consisting of all regions where the Karen were the majority. The majority of the rank and file of the KNLA were Buddhist Karen, while the leadership was Christian. This led to tensions. The Buddhist Karen felt that they were exploited by the Christian leaders. As a result, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) was formed in 1994 under the patronage of U Thuzana, a charismatic Karen Buddhist monk. As a consequence, the headquarters of the KNU and other opposition groups located at the Thai border were lost in early 1995 to the military junta that ruled Myanmar after 1988. Therefore we hardly can speak of THE Karen people as a united entity. We have to differentiate between various groups of Karen with particular interests and organization – e.g. the refugees, the Karen diaspora, the internally displaced Karen, and the great number of the “other” Karen, as Thawngmung calls them (2013). The latter are often victims who suffer because of the Karen struggle for autonomy and the clashes with the Burmese army. Most of what has been retold here was not known to Saw Phae Dae. He belonged to the group of Karen living in the east of the country close to the Thai border and was just dragged into the conflicts between the Karen and the Burmese as well as into the Buddhist–Christian divide.

Saw Phar Dae

Saw Phar Dae (*1945) grew up in Mawlamyine, the capital of Mon State. He was the first born child of U Shwe Tun and Daw Shwe, who both were

Sa'gaw Karen. The family occasionally lived on Bilu Island, just offshore from Mawlamyine. Bilu Island was the place of origin of Daw Shwe, his mother. His father, U Shwe Tun, was from a Karen town south of Mawlamyine, Kyainseikgyi. Both of them, U Shwe Tun and Daw Shwe, went to different schools near their homes. These schools were responsible for the conversion of U Shwe Tun and Daw Shwe to the Baptist branch of Christianity, which is the biggest Christian community in Myanmar. It was the school organisation, too, which arranged the marriage later. All this happened in the 1940s, at the time of the Japanese conquest of Burma. Saw Phar Dae has two younger siblings born in the early 1950s. He remembers his school time as a time he did not like. He made it up to standard five and tried to pass standard six for some years. But neither the school nor his family thrilled him. When he was fourteen years old, he left home and joined a group of Karen youngsters who roamed the woods. It was at this time that he met many of the later KNU members and leaders – Dawle was one of them.



Map

In Saw Phar Dae's memory he might have been around 26 years old when

he was introduced to a gemstone trader. This trader was Karen as well and was used to traveling between Kachin State in the north of the country, which is rich in gemstones, and the trading town of Mawlamyine. Soon after meeting the trader, Saw Phar Dae started to engage in illegal gemstone trade with Thailand. He took stones from the trader in Mawlamyine and went by boat to Kyainseikgyi. A wearing and daring hike followed, which took him about two days through the dense forest of Karen State. This was the time when Saw Phar Dae became familiar with the rough landscape of his ancestors. Another three-hour boat ride brought him finally to Mae Sot in Thailand. Since the Karen are living both in Burma and Thailand, it was possible for traders and couriers like Saw Phar Dae to easily pass the border illegally. Usually, his journey ended in Mae Sot, but once he even went to Bangkok – without any immigration paper. Usually upon reaching Mae Sot he had to hand over his trading goods, the gemstones, to another courier on the Thai side. In return, Saw Phar Dae later got money from this courier, which he again brought to the trader in Mawlamyine. This was the routine procedure and it worked quite well. He brought gemstones to Thailand every three to five months. It was quite a lucrative job, since the gemstones were precious.

In the second year of his courier job, Saw Phar Dae was cheated by the Thai courier. Saw Phar Dae brought an exceptionally big and pure ruby from Mawlamyine. After he handed it over to the Thai courier, he never saw him again – nor the money, which he was obliged to hand over to the Karen trader in Mawlamyine. He became afraid of returning home, since he had no money to pay to the Karen trader. He stayed in the villages of the hinterland of Karen State. At that time he did not realise that he would only return to Mawlamyine 43 years later, that he would not see his mother again, and that his decision had a fateful consequence for his whole family in Mawlamyine – as he learned much later. Only his brother visited him from time to time on his travels through the region – but he never said anything about the consequences for his family.

Saw Phar Dae stayed in Win Kha Na village and joined the group of Dawle, whom he knew from his younger days. Dawle was a local KNU leader in the

meantime; he controlled Win Ywa Township, which was one of four parts of the KNU region no. 6. This region was (and is still) controlled by the KNU and not by the Tatmadaw. Small groups of twenty to thirty patrolled their region – and Saw Phar Dae was one of them. From time to time, he served as a teacher in one of the village schools when there was a shortage of teachers. He has good memories of his time as a member of Dawle's group. He loved the freedom of wandering through the forest area, which he fell in love with. Admittedly the expeditions were demanding too, but he would pursue one of his favourite activities: hunting. When the group needed food while patrolling the area, the leader always turned to Saw Phar Dae because he was the best marksman and he always hit his targets.



The surroundings of Saw Phar Dae's village (Photos: Winterberger)

It was on one of these patrols when he met a local Karen girl, Se Wa, who lived in Thanbaya, one of the villages they controlled. They met from time to time over a period of three years before they asked Dawle for permission to marry. After the wedding in Win Kha Na village – Saw Phar Dae was nearly 30 years old – he and Se Wa went to Thanbaya village to live there. They raised three children – a girl and two boys. Nevertheless Saw Phar Dae still joined Dawle on his patrols through the KNU region. Since the KNU is the political wing of the Karen movement, the KNU “fighters” were not trained soldiers – the regular soldiers were united in the KNLA.

Nevertheless, the KNU fighters had clashes with the Tatmadaw. Usually Dawle and his group with Saw Phar Dae tried to avoid making contact with the Burmese Army. If Burmese soldiers appeared – often using Karen villagers and porters as human shields – the KNU fighters hid in the forest. Nevertheless they were ambushed by the Tatmadaw two times during Saw Phar Dae's time as a KNU fighter. Up to five KNU fighters died in one clash, but in these fights there were no casualties on the Burmese side.

Saw Phar Dae had a happy marriage, except for one thing: his wife Se Wa descends from a Buddhist family. From the beginning, his parents-in-law wanted him to convert to Buddhism. He always refused, since he was raised as a Baptist. The fact of different religions within this marriage became a problem over the years, until Saw Phar Dae and Se Wa decided to divorce after more than 10 years of marriage. Saw Phar Dae says today that he doesn't like religions, neither Baptism nor Buddhism. He never again saw one of his children after the divorce. But he remained true to Dawle and roamed the region. He loved the freedom and nature, "to be free and to do what I want" is the sentence he uses today in describing this time of his life.

This time came to an abrupt end. His commitment as a KNU fighter was closely connected to his leader. When Dawle was assassinated in an underhand manner, Saw Phar Dae decided to leave the group and the KNU after more than 20 years as a fighter. As a 50-year-old man he retired to Htee Phar Htaw village, which he always loved because of its pure nature and the freedom he felt there. He had (and has) a lot of friends there from his time when he patrolled the region. Although he still owns no house, he is always welcome in one of his friends' houses. Saw Phar Dae was making his living by hunting animals – mainly birds with an airgun – and selling them in the village.

The Burmese army paid visits to Htee Phar Htaw village from time to time. They were looking for Karen soldiers, army facilities, or strong Karen men whom they took as porters or forced labourers. Saw Phar Dae always hid himself in the forest as the other villagers did. He decided later to flee to Thailand – as others did. He lived for around two years in the Hwe Malei

refugee camp in Thailand. It was safe there and a lot of his friends and Karen acquaintances were living there, too. But he couldn't be happy there; he had nothing to do and the camp life was regulated by Thai authorities. He missed the freedom and landscape of his beloved village. Despite the danger, he returned home on a three-day walk. Back in Htee Phar Htaw village, he lived a happy life. However, it was not without hazards. The villagers still had to hide from the Burmese army from time to time, but it was (and still is) a life in freedom. And today the Burmese soldiers are not coming any more.

Saw Phar Dae's youngest son lives nearby and they meet often. His brother visits him from time to time on his travels through the region. Some years ago Saw Phar Dae found out that his mother had died in the meantime in Mawlamyine. He also found out about what had happened decades ago, when he did not return to Mawlamyine after being cheated by the Thai courier. When the Karen trader in Mawlamyine could not obtain the money from Saw Phar Dae, he contacted the family. His mother paid out the trader by selling part of her land. If Saw Phar Dae had known then, he would have gone back to Mawlamyine to stand for his debts. But so many years later, at the age of nearly 60 years and penniless, he saw no reason for returning to Mawlamyine. He only did it years later because his nephew insisted. Saw Phar Dae lived his life as a hunter until his eyes became weaker and he had problems hitting the target. He was then 70. He decided to sell his beloved gun. For four years now he is making a living by selling Thai lottery in the village. He is worried about his future. Although he is still able to take care of himself, nobody knows for how long. He doesn't know what will happen then and who will take care of him.

Afterthoughts

To describe Saw Phar Dae as an idealistic person fighting for his fatherland would not be correct. He rather accidentally joined the KNU. But more important is that he overcame all difficulties and hazards in his life. Saw Phar Dae seems to make his own decisions in his life. In his youth he loved

to range the woods with friends. At this time the KNU had only recently been founded – some ten to fifteen years before. It was growing and on the way to being a powerful and influential organisation. It became attractive for the commitment of the youth. But this was not the case for Saw Phar Dae. He joined the KNU for other reasons, On the one hand, he was good friends with Dawle since his younger years. In the meantime, Dawle had become one of the sub-leaders of KNU region no. 6. Saw Phar Dae joined Dawle's group because of his deep friendship and his wish to support his friend. On the other hand, Saw Phar Dae was afraid of returning to his hometown because the cheating Thai gemstone courier left him in a precarious situation and without money. Saw Phar Dae was in a situation of not knowing what to do next. His decision was based on a mixture of reasons. Only the fact that Saw Phar Dae left the KNU soon after Dawle was murdered supports the assumption that it was mainly the close relationship with his friend that made him a Karen fighter. Saw Phar Dae himself does not think about the reasons behind his commitment. He points out that he was satisfied with the situation of his life after he joined the group of Dawle.

Freedom, love towards his homeland, and independence from social or materialistic constraints are some of the key words that seem to run through Saw Phar Dae's life. Nevertheless, he could not avoid one strong influence of his social milieu. The tensions between Buddhist and Christian Karen that led to the formation of the DKBA in 1994 affected Saw Phae Dae personally. The more or less hidden tension between his Buddhist parents-in-law and himself came to the surface. His parents-in-law finally faced him with the choice between becoming Buddhist or divorcing his wife. He decided to divorce. Was it because of religion? Saw Phar Dae says no — he doesn't like religions. Was it because of tradition or the habits of his life? He doesn't know for sure. But freedom and self-determination surely played a key role in this decision.

And this is how Saw Phar Dae has lived his life up to today. When his eyes were getting worse, he made his own decision and looked for other work. He didn't rail against his fate, but sold the gun which he had used so many years – and he started a new life at the age of seventy!

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Footnotes

¹ The Burmese name for 'Karen' is 'Kayin'. This text uses the English word which is used by many Karen/Kayin when they talk about themselves to foreigners.

[2](#) No exact numbers exist, but the percentage of Christian Karen is estimated to be 25% (Gravers 2014: 175).

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